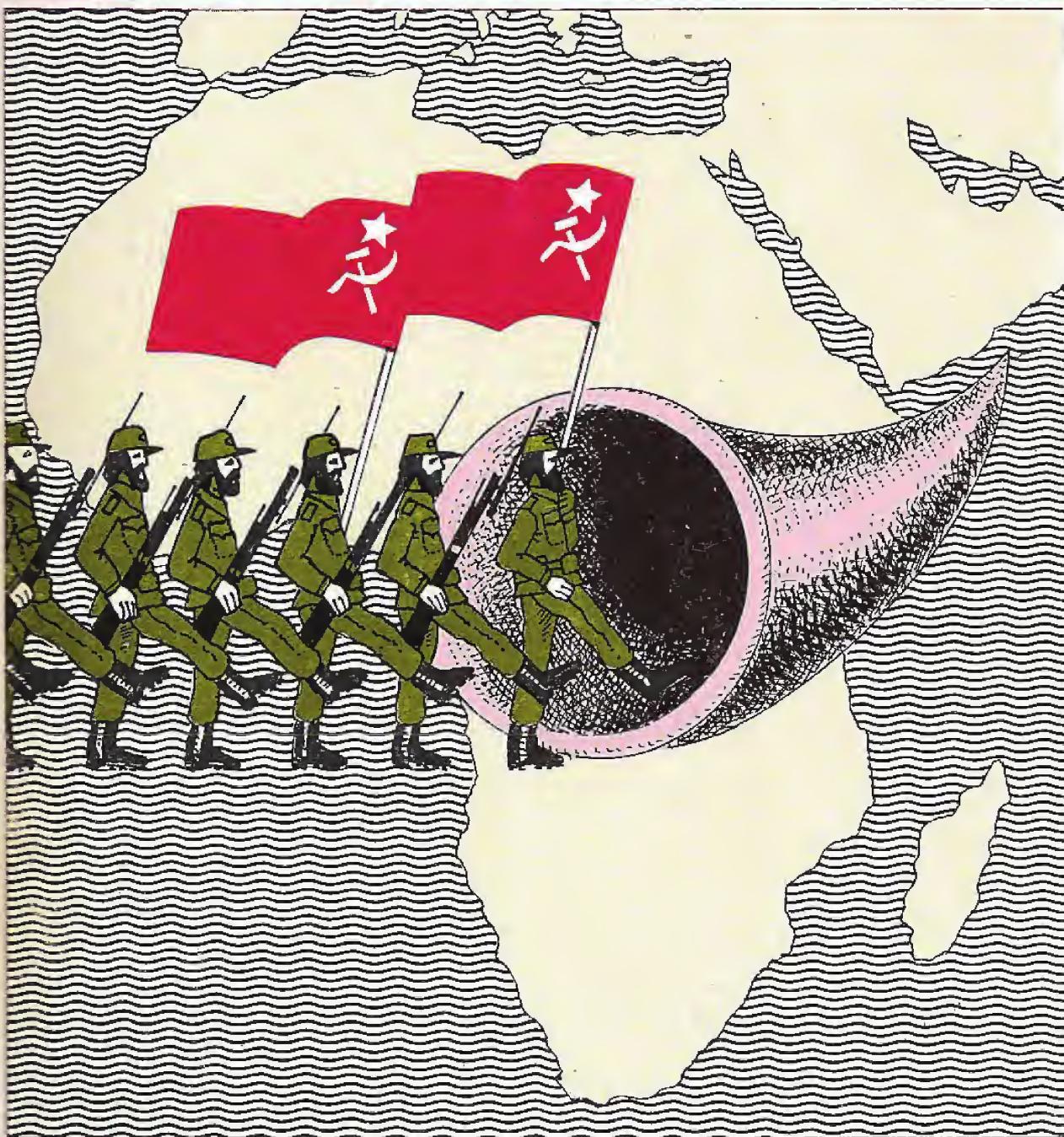


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Follow the Leader in the Horn

The Soviet-Cuban presence in East Africa

by William E. Ratliff



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William E. Ratliff is a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University. He is editorial writer for the *Times Tribune* of Palo Alto, California and has taught political theory and international politics at Stanford and other Bay Area universities.

The Cuban American National Foundation

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INTRODUCTION

During the late 1970s, Cuba suddenly became a major military force in the Horn of Africa. Between December 1977 and April 1978, Fidel Castro joined the Soviet Union in the most expensive and devastating blitz ever launched by non-African—or any other—forces on the African continent. In those few months, more than 15,000 Cuban troops, fortified by Soviet advisers and more than a billion dollars worth of Soviet military aid, were sent to the Horn and crushed a major Somali invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The action saved the Soviet Union’s most recent ally in East Africa—Ethiopian strongman Mengistu Haile Mariam—and assured a major Soviet-bloc role in the strategically critical East Africa/Red Sea/Indian Ocean region of the world.

The action and its aftermath raised Castro’s already high international profile even as it promoted the broad geostrategic objectives of the entire Soviet bloc. But it required Castro to jettison causes he had previously supported and turn on two former allies in rapid succession—first Somalia and then, with less firepower but greater venality, on the Eritrean independence movement in the northernmost “province” of Mengistu’s beleaguered land.

These two betrayals clearly illustrate the Cuban leader’s readiness to reverse political positions and sacrifice allies to serve what he considers his own and Cuba’s interests, and/or the interests of the Soviet Union. And the two events in the Horn—along with Cuban policy in Angola and other parts of Africa—demonstrate Castro’s willingness to make the Cuban people pay for his adventures, in diverted attention, treasure, talent, and an estimated 7,000 to 9,000 lives.

Castro would like the world to forget some of what has happened in the Horn because events there tarnish the carefully cultivated image of Castro as a selfless revolutionary who supports the rights of all suppressed peoples seeking liberation from oppressive—and particularly “colonial”—governments. The Horn experience disfigures that carefully crafted image.

But the significance of these events is more than the pattern of shifting allegiances and unprincipled betrayals in East Africa. The events—and those in Angola beginning a couple of years earlier—help clarify Cuban and Soviet revolutionary strategies in broader terms, and highlight the consequences of a major power—the United States—ignoring a power

vacuum even after other countries demonstrate dramatically they are only too prepared to try to fill it. Not least important, Soviet/Cuban policy in Africa laid the groundwork for the at least equally important Soviet-Cuban cooperation in Latin America during the late-1970s and 1980s, with all that may mean for the future of the Western Hemisphere.

CASTRO TAKES AIM AT THE UNITED STATES

For more than a quarter century, Fidel Castro has shaped the domestic and foreign policies of the Cuban government. For personal and broader political reasons, Castro evidently is consumed by an almost pathological hatred and mistrust of—not to mention contempt for—the United States. As a quarter century of speeches make clear, he sees himself as something of a virtuous King Arthur out to vanquish the American “imperialist” dragon on behalf of all the exploited people of the world. And for a variety of reasons, ranging from his personal charisma to the allies he has chosen, Castro has been extraordinarily successful in exercising far greater influence in the world than one would expect from the leader of such a small country in the Caribbean.

Some critics of U.S. policy in Latin America have maintained that United States hostility toward Castro drove the Cuban leader into the Soviet embrace. But Castro's own private correspondence—now on public display in Havana—gives the lie to this thesis. In 1958, while he was still fighting Batista and publicly proclaiming the virtues of the Western-style democracy, Castro wrote to a confidant about his true destiny as a foe of the United States: “When this war is over, a much wider and bigger war will begin for me; the war that I am going to launch against them. I am saying to myself that is my true destiny.” In an interview in 1984, Castro acknowledged that U.S. hostility was not a major factor in his turn to the Soviet Union.¹

Once in power, Castro officially adopted Marxism-Leninism for several reasons. For starters, it provided a formula—in fact, innumerable formulas—for consolidating domestic control, though during the 1960s in particular, his “personalist” policies reflected what Lenin called the infantile disorders of anti-Marxist ultra-leftism. Adopting Marxism-Leninism also brought him the support of some better organized communists

¹ Hugh Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), p. 278. Speech cited in *The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America and the Caribbean* (Washington: Department of State, 1985), pp. 4-6.

at home. But most important of all, it put him in the Soviet camp among the world's most powerful enemies of the United States. He became the Western Hemisphere outpost of a much broader movement which focused on the destruction of the United States and its allies.

It is true that during much of the 1960s Cuba and the Soviet Union were at odds on how to deal with the United States and revolution in Latin America. First there was the 1962 Missile Crisis, during which Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy negotiated over Castro's head, an affront the Cuban leader has never forgotten. Tensions eased over the next couple of years, but another low point came between 1966 and 1968 when Castro and Soviet leaders differed openly on revolutionary strategy in Latin America.²

For several years Castro spat out condemnations of pro-Soviet and other “false revolutionaries” who thwarted violent revolution throughout the continent. During those years he backed “Castroite” guerrilla bands throughout the continent with words, training, supplies and even men. Che Guevara's debacle in Bolivia in 1966-67 was the ultimate “Castroite” adventure—as that infantile strategy had been outlined in Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?* which was published in Havana in January 1967. In the words of Guevara's chief Cuban lieutenant in Bolivia, Guevara's Bolivian undertaking was a transnational effort “to make another Vietnam out of America, with its center in Bolivia.” Since Guevara got little support from other Marxist-Leninists in Bolivia, his band consisted largely of Cubans and “Castroites” from neighboring countries. With no local allies, it was almost inevitable that they would spend their days and nights stumbling friendless through the wilds until the vast majority were cornered and killed.³

Castro adopted a less militant line from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s because, some analysts argue, he finally realized the toll his guerrilla model was taking on Latin American revolutionaries. And, it is argued, he needed Soviet aid to rebuild his own chaotic economy. So he adopted an international line more in accord with Moscow's.

² William Ratliff, *Castroism and Communism in Latin America* (Washington, D.C.: AEI/Hoover Institution, 1976), chapters 1 and 2.

³ See Daniel James, ed. *The Complete Bolivian Diaries of Che Guevara and Other Captured Documents* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 287. Also Ratliff, *Castroism and Communism*, pp. 123-26.

SOVIET-CUBAN COOPERATION IN THE THIRD WORLD

A critical shift in Cuban and Soviet global strategies emerged in 1975 and subsequently had immense international impact. In that year the two countries, backed by several other Soviet-bloc nations, began a cooperative effort in Angola which foreshadowed the joint Soviet-Cuban involvement in the Horn several years later. Castro told Garcia Marquez that Cuban support for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was an "independent and sovereign act" and that the Soviet Union was only told about it later, an assertion made as well by Cuban Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez. That may be true in a legalistic way but, as George Volsky has remarked, "It is difficult, if not naive, to suppose that the Russians, after fifteen years of close relations with Cuba, were not privy to what was being planned at the highest levels of the Cuban government." In fact, we probably can assume Castro was assured that "if the Cuban military intervention did not meet a resolute Western response it would be eventually fully supported by Moscow."⁴

This Soviet-Cuban cooperation in Africa reflected important changes in how Castro and Soviet policy makers looked at the world and sought to mold it to serve their national interests. In a large part these changes reflected lessons both countries had picked up in previous years. When the United States washed its hands of developments in Angola, the Soviet government quickly was convinced that the Americans had been rendered virtually impotent by problems resulting from the Vietnam war and Watergate. The U.S. defeat in Vietnam promoted an isolationist tendency in U.S. foreign policy, in particular discouraging any kind of international involvement which might result in another "Vietnam war" morass. And the Watergate scandal led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, weakened the Executive Branch, and, to some extent, in the eyes of many Americans, discredited the American political systems generally. These events, along with other developments, including the earlier overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected govern-

ment in Chile in 1973, convinced Soviet leaders that they should throw greater support behind revolutionary movements.

But the occasion for cooperation in Africa presupposed several other developments as well. During the early 1970s Castro turned his attention to getting his house in order. And by the mid-1970s the Cuban economy, with massive Soviet assistance, had recovered somewhat from the disastrous policies of the 1960s, and a new community of international revolutionary interests was developing between Cuba and the Soviet Union. With some expectation of Soviet support, Castro could again pursue his overwhelming international ambitions. Increasingly this meant being a leader in Third World political circles and acting as a liaison between underdeveloped countries and the Soviet Union. And finally, with extensive Soviet assistance, Cuban intelligence and military forces had become among the most formidable in the Third World.⁵

In terms of revolutionary strategy, Castro had concluded that it is more effective to promote and support broad united fronts against unpopular governments in a country than to nurture the kind of narrow-based squabblers he had cultivated less than a decade before. Once Cuba accepted that strategy, and the Soviet Union was interested in supporting joint military actions in the Third World, Africa was politically unstable and so far from the American sphere of influence that that nation would not respond to any political or military challenge. The Soviet Union was prepared to send material and advisers considerably beyond its borders, but could hardly get away with sending the troops some undisciplined, incompetent African armies needed to wage serious warfare. Cuba, on the other hand, was prepared—nay, eager—to provide military forces in the guise of a friendly fellow Third World ally.

Subsequently, this alliance became the cornerstone of Cuban policy in Latin America, particularly in the Caribbean Basin during the late 1970s and the 1980s.⁶

⁴ George Volsky, "Cuba," in Thomas H. Henriksen, ed., *Communist Powers and Sub-Saharan Africa* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1981), pp. 57-63. Carmelo Mesa-Lago likewise concludes, it is "difficult to accept that Cuba—even if it was the initiator—could have gone into Angola without previous consultation and coordination with the USSR." Mesa-Lago, "Causes and Effects," in Mesa-Lago, ed., *Cuba in Africa* (Pittsburgh: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1982), p. 199.

⁵ See Mesa-Lago "Causes and Effects," pp. 197-200; and Roger Fontaine and Robert Henderson, "Cuban Activities in Africa," in Michael Samuels, Chester Crocker et. al, eds., *Implications of Soviet and Cuban Activities in Africa for U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1979), pp. 43-55.

⁶ William Ratliff, "Playing Dominoes in Central America," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 May 1983; and William Ratliff, "The Future of Latin American Insurgencies," in Georges Faure, ed., *Latin American Insurgencies* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1985), pp. 174-79

CUBAN INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICA

Cuban interest in Africa had begun the year of the Cuban Revolution. Che Guevara visited several African countries in 1959 and Cuba became a founding member of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement. The first Cuban military assistance to an African country went to Algeria in 1960; after Algerian independence in 1962, Cuba established a military mission in Algiers.⁷

Other contacts followed. Most importantly, Guevara traveled secretly to the Congo (now Zaire) in April 1965 and was soon followed by several hundred Cuban troops and officers; they trained and commanded guerrillas fighting Moïse Tshombe and his Belgian-backed forces in Katanga. Guevara left, discouraged by the experience, but in the words of Castro's friend, Colombian novelist Gabriel García Marquez, he "planted in Africa a [revolutionary] seed that nobody was able to eradicate." Castro convened the Afro-Asian-Latin American People's Solidarity Organization (Tricontinental) Conference in Havana in January 1966 and over the next nine years pursued low-level but sometimes significant military and other contacts in Africa.

Cuba took little notice of the Horn of Africa during the 1960s. A military coup in Somalia in 1969 resulted in a government led by General Mohammad Siad Barre. The new Somali leader proclaimed his intention to build a socialist society, but only gradually developed close ties to the Soviet bloc. Cuba did not establish diplomatic relations with Somalia until 19 July 1972. On 17 August 1972, however, in a joint communiqué, Havana and Mogadishu gave the first formal statement of Cuban support for Siad Barre on what was perhaps his chief goal, the unification of all the ethnic Somali peoples, who are spread around in Djibouti, northern Kenya and much of Ethiopia, in addition to Somalia. In the communiqué, the Cuban Foreign Minister

expressed his government's support for the Somali peoples in their desire for reunification and for the Democratic Republic of Somalia's Supreme Revolutionary Council policy of resolving the territorial disputes with its neighbors

⁷ The most useful individual introductions to Cuban policies in Africa are those in Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in Africa*, and Volsky, *Communist Powers*. Also the invaluable annual surveys in Colin Legum, ed., *Africa Contemporary Record*, published in London and New York by Holmes & Meier.

through peaceful negotiations and within an African framework.⁸

Here Cuba expressed its unequivocal support for the reunification of the Somali peoples. But this could only be achieved by a major political reorganization in the region, which is precisely what Siad Barre had in mind. However, the statement also is a mass of revolutionary jargon and side-stepping of issues.

It comes down on the side of a peaceful resolution of the matter, which was almost certainly impossible, and for carrying it out within an African framework, which according to the Organization of African Unity meant no changing of borders, which is an even less likely prospect. Virtually the only thing all African leaders agree on is that borders inherited from the colonial period, however absurdly drawn, are inviolable, for to admit that one should be changed is to call all the others into question.

But Cuban, and especially Soviet, actions soon were speaking more loudly than the words of the communiqué. Cuba began sending advisers and aid to Somalia. And in 1974 the Soviet Union and Somalia signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation which was in force until November 1977, when it was unilaterally abrogated by Siad Barre and the Soviets were expelled from the crucial port of Berbera. While in force, however, the treaty had resulted in a massive military buildup in Somalia, costing between \$1 billion and \$2 billion, which Soviet leaders and their allies had to know was far more than necessary for a country simply intent upon having peaceful relations with its neighbors.

Meanwhile, Castro was even later developing interest in the government of Ethiopia, which until September 1974 was under the control of pro-American Emperor Haile Selassie. The only important position adopted toward Ethiopia during the late 1960s by Cuba and the Soviet Union was one of strong support for the Eritrean independence movement in the northernmost section of Selassie's Ethiopia, a traditionally independent region which Haile Selassie annexed (in defiance of a 1950 resolution of the United Nations) in 1962. The organ of the Afro-Asian-Latin American People's Solidarity Organization proclaimed the Eritrean movement "a struggle for national independence and for their liberation from Ethiopian colonialism."⁹

⁸ *Granma*, Havana, 19 August 1972, 9. *Tricontinental*, December 1969, p. 30

⁹ *Tricontinental*, December 1969, p. 30

Prior to the overthrow of the Emperor by young military officers in September 1974, Cuban analysts spoke of Eritrea as "a territory arbitrarily annexed by Ethiopia since 1962," and called the city of Asmara "the capital of the colony." For some years beginning in the late 1960s, Cubans trained some Eritrean Liberation Front, and then Eritrean People's Liberation Front, guerrillas in Cuba and abroad. It is not clear how long that aid continued, though one analyst has speculated that it may have lasted until Cuba recognized the Ethiopian government in July 1975.¹⁰

After Cuban recognition of Ethiopia in 1975, all talk of Eritrea's "colonial" status ended, but it was not until 1977 that Cuba pointedly reversed its first position and began speaking of Eritrea as an integral part of Ethiopia and asserting that Eritrea was an internal problem, aggravated only by meddling of the American Central Intelligence Agency.

The year 1977 was critical in the development of contemporary Ethiopia. In February of that year the power struggle within the military leadership was settled when Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam carried out an in-house coup which gave him virtual dictatorial power. Many of his political and military opponents had been killed in the engagements leading up to the coup; those who remained were purged—usually murdered, their bodies left on the streets—over the next year. Some sources state that Cuba was actively involved in launching the so-called "Red Terror" which wiped out the opposition—while there is considerable evidence to the contrary as well—and that Mengistu's personal bodyguards are Cubans.¹¹ In any event, Cuban leaders immediately proclaimed Mengistu's coup the "triumph" of the Ethiopian revolution.¹² After this "triumph" in Ethiopia, Cuba's betrayals of its allies—first the Somalis and then the Eritreans—came in rapid succession.

¹⁰ Daniel S. Papp, "The Soviet Union and Cuba in Ethiopia," *Current History*, March 1979, p. 111; Volsky, "Cuba," p. 73; "Ethiopia," ACR, 1978-79, p. B222; Colin Legum and Bill Lee, "Crisis in the Horn of Africa," ACR, 1977-78, p. A39; "Ethiopia: Eritrean Unity at Last?," *Africa Confidential*, 31 March 1978, p. 6; *Daily Telegraph*, London, 10 April 1969, cited in *Latin American Topics*, British Foreign Office, September 1969, p. 179; Vincent B. Khapoya and Baffour Agyeman-Duah, "The Cold War and Regional Politics in East Africa," *Conflict Quarterly* (University of New Brunswick, Canada), Spring 1985, p. 24; Nelson P. Valdés, "Cuba's Involvement in the Horn of Africa," in Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in Africa*.

¹¹ "Ethiopia: The People's Revolutionary Party," *Africa Confidential*, 6 January 1978, p. 5; *The Eritrean Review*, April/May 1984, p. 21.

¹² *Granma*, 7 February 1977.

SOVIET-CUBAN POLICIES IN THE HORN

When Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, Cuban and Soviet relations in the Horn became more complicated. Neither seemed to realize at first just how complex—and yet how simple—the new situation was. Soviet leaders, and their Cuban allies, hoped they would be able to establish a socialist federation in the Horn—incorporating Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, South Yemen, and perhaps even distant countries, including Libya. What is more, they may have so misunderstood the realities of the Horn as to think that Ethiopia and Somalia, once they both presumably were marching together up the glorious road to socialism, would forget their "petty" disputes: the Somalis would give up their plans to reunite the Somali peoples, for example, and the Eritreans and others within borders claimed by Ethiopia would rally behind the new government in Addis Ababa. But immediately the intractable realities began to emerge.

The Eritreans were not interested in any agreement that would leave them at the mercy of Mengistu or his heirs, and Siad Barre in Somalia still intended to unite the Somali people, by war if necessary. In 1976 the Eritreans stepped up their military operations in the north and Somalia planned its invasion of Ethiopia's eastern province of Ogaden.

As late as early 1977 Moscow and Havana were still trying to make comrades of their socialist brothers. Castro became a shuttle diplomat, visiting several friendly African countries, winding up in Aden conducting negotiations for the regional federation of Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Yemen. When it finally became clear that the federation would not work, the communist nations had to make a choice between supporting Somalia or Ethiopia. The choice was clear, though it meant sacrificing two former allies.

The greater strategic importance of Ethiopia was obvious. Ethiopia was twice as large geographically, with far greater natural resources and almost ten times the population. It had long borders with several other major countries (including Sudan, Kenya and Somalia), strategically important Red Sea ports of Massawa and Assab, the important airfield at Asmara, and the Dahlak Archipelago in the Red Sea (all on or just off the Eritrean coast). Clearly Soviet interest in Ethiopia was, above all, interest in the strategic importance of the country, above all in the territory in or near Eritrea. With a foothold in Ethiopia, the Soviet Union could establish a distinct presence in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region.

SOMALIA AND THE OGADEN WAR

Somalia had long been supporting the ethnic-Somali guerrillas of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in the Ogaden province of eastern Ethiopia, a bloody campaign against Ethiopian domination. Then, on 17 June 1977, Somalia sent its troops openly into Ogaden to join the guerrillas of the WSLF. The Ethiopian forces collapsed. The Somali guerrillas and regulars, the latter armed and trained by the Soviet Union, pushed the "Abyssinians," as the Somalis called the Ethiopians to emphasize their colonial past, out of most of the Ogaden. A second Somali offensive was launched in November while Eritrean armies swept to new victories in the north. Suddenly Castro (and the Soviet Union) began to proclaim that Somalia was not guided by socialism after all, but by chauvinism, and "the mad idea of a Greater Somalia carried them into the arms of the imperialist camp."¹³ So much for the reunification Cuba had endorsed in 1972.

Soviet-Cuban contingency plans had been underway since at least December 1976 when the Soviets signed a secret military assistance pact with Ethiopia. In early 1977 a Cuban military adviser arrived with an advance party of military personnel who laid the groundwork for the influx of thousands of Cuban troops in late 1977 and early 1978. Soviet and Cuban aid to Ethiopia was trickling in by mid-1977; the number of military advisers began to flow in at higher levels in September, just as Mengistu was waging what Adam Ulam called "indiscriminate terror" against his own people.¹⁴

Soviet-Cuban military support became a torrent between December 1977 and March 1978 when the two communist countries launched the most extensive military aid program in African history. Cuban troop strength in Ethiopia rocketed up from about 400 in early December to more than 15,000 in March, though Cuba did not admit to having troops there until 14 March, after the war was over. After the fact, Castro bragged that during February and March "medium-sized" Cuban military units had played a leading role in defeating the Somalis.¹⁵ Cuba threw in officers, infantry, artillery, mechanized brigades, tanks, and Cuban-piloted MIG fighters.

¹³ Radio Havana, Havana, 27 April 1978.

¹⁴ Adam B. Ulam, *Dangerous Relations: The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1970-1982* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 179.

¹⁵ Radio Havana, 14 March 1978; *Granma*, 26 March 1978.

The humiliating defeat inflicted upon the Somalis was, according to African history expert Colin Legum, "largely through the intervention of the Cuban expeditionary force." Mengistu finally acknowledged the Cuban role in early March and Castro called Cuba the "defensive shield of the Ethiopian Revolution." Soviet military aid during that period amounted to something between \$1 billion and \$2 billion. In the space of a few months, Soviet aid and Cuban troops had driven Somali government forces and almost a million ethnic-Somali refugees back into Somali territory.¹⁶

REACTIONS TO THE CUBAN-SOVIET POLICY

In January 1978 Somalia proclaimed in the United Nations that Cuba was a mercenary "serving Soviet imperialism." But not just the Somalis. When it was learned that Cuban pilots were flying in Ethiopia while Soviet pilots manned Cuban air defenses, *The New York Times* editorialized, "This news brands the Cubans the tools of Soviet imperial purposes . . . it turns the Cubans into the world's foremost intercontinental force of mercenaries."¹⁷

Predictably, the OAU overwhelmingly proclaimed Somalia the aggressor—since they were not about to grant the legitimacy of changing a border by force—and said Ethiopia had the right to ask for help in repelling the attack.¹⁸ Some analysts have concluded that many African states do not perceive Cuba as a Soviet surrogate but as an overseas African state linked to African bloc interests in the Third World.¹⁹

Castro's stock went down with most African governments between 1979 and 1982, when the Cuban leader was president of the so-called

¹⁶ Zdenk Cervenka and Colin Legum, "Cuba in Africa in 1978: How Non-Aligned?", in *ACR*, 1978-1979, pp. A59-60. Also, "Ethiopia," *ACR*, 1977-1978, pp. B225-29, *ACR*, 1978-1979, p. B197-200, and *ACR*, 1979-1980, p. B213; Valdés, "Cuba in the Horn," pp. 67-78; Ulam, *Dangerous Relations*, p. 179; Khapoya and Agyeman-Duah, "Cold War in East Africa," p. 27.

¹⁷ Valdés, "Cuba in the Horn," p. 73; *New York Times*, 15 February 1978. The only top member of U.S. President Jimmy Carter's administration who consistently advocated a decisive American reaction to the Soviet/Cuban offensive in Ethiopia, particularly during the Ogaden War, was Zbigniew Brzezinski; the national security adviser wrote of his frustrated efforts in *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), pp. 178ff.

¹⁸ *ACR*, 1977-78, p. A37.

¹⁹ Roy Arthur Glasgow, "African Relations with Latin America and the Caribbean," in Jack Hopkins, ed., *Latin America and Caribbean Contemporary Record* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), pp. 193-94.

Non-Aligned Movement [NAM]. As Cervenka and Legum wrote in 1980, Castro's star "appeared to be dimming in Africa, largely because of his role as current chairman of the NAM, which many Africans saw as a rather crude attempt to move it from its independent position in world affairs to alliance with Moscow."²⁰ Opinions in the African press ranged from those that proclaimed Cuba "an overseas African state" to those that agreed more with *The Daily Nation* (24 March 1980) in Nairobi, Kenya, which said:

Cuba has no business in Africa. Where it has intervened, in partnership with the USSR, things have got worse rather than better Cuba may have a number of radical followers in Africa; but they are relatively few Cuba has overstepped itself and aroused widespread opposition, even animosity. Its intervention in Africa is a major reason. Another, and even more fundamental reason to some African leaders, is the way Cuba has tied itself closely to the Soviet Union. Cuba is the Soviet's agent in Africa, endorses all Soviet policies and is a member of the Soviet bloc's economic organization. Moscow has trained the Cuban army and supplies it with all its equipment—for free. Hardly the mark of a Non-aligned nation²¹

THE ERITREAN WAR

After the defeat of the Somalis in March 1978, the Ethiopian government turned its attention toward Eritrea. This war was an embarrassment for the Soviet Union and Cuba, for both had supported the Eritrean independence struggle while Emperor Haile Selassie was in power. But as the Ethiopian revolutionary government became increasingly close to the Soviet bloc, Moscow's pragmatism led to a string of rationalizations, a reversal of the earlier policies, support for a peaceful resolution, and ultimate willingness to go along with Mengistu in a military solution. That is, to a betrayal of their former Eritrean friends.

When Soviet leaders concluded that their best access to the geostrategic advantages of Eritrea was through Mengistu, they totally withdrew their support from the ELF and other Eritrean guerrilla groups, which emerged from in-fighting among the guerrillas during the 1970s. The

most important of the new groups was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), with the strongest Marxist-Leninist orientation and many things in common with Cuba. Cuba was more reluctant than the Soviet Union to openly turn on these groups, and differences of emphasis persisted among Castro, Mengistu, and the Soviet leaders, but Cuba nonetheless followed the Soviet lead and provided critical support for the Ethiopian campaign in Eritrea—not to mention campaigns against other secessionist groups, as in Tigre—which some analysts choose to ignore or explain away.

After the Somali move into Ogaden, the Cuban government began a campaign of denying the colonial status of Eritrea and of asserting that the United States and other reactionary powers were stirring up trouble in that northern region. In February 1977, for example, the CIA was accused of trying to exploit "national differences" in Eritrea.²² Raúl Valdés Vivó, who was in charge of foreign affairs for the Cuban Communist Party, wrote in 1977 that the Ethiopian military was "defending Asmara against the blows of the separatist forces encouraged by the Arab reaction and imperialism"²³ And Castro himself, in April 1978, said the Eritrean problem had to be resolved "within the framework of an Ethiopian revolutionary state." And he added that a "peaceful and just solution" had to be worked out on the basis of "Leninist principles," one of those supposedly legitimizing formulas that in reality—whether in Leninist experience or Castroite experience—has little to do with peaceful solutions.²⁴

As one Eritrean put it: "The incontrovertible fact is, at least in Eritrea, that Cuba is expending its moral and political energy, not to say the blood of its citizens, to uphold a colonial status quo. This is a contradiction of enormous proportion, for which neither the Cubans nor their allies will be able to find any justification based on socialist principles."²⁵

What was the practical consequence of this Cuban shift? Let's look first at troops. This is where some analysts begin hedging and suggest that since Cuba did not send in 10,000 troops to try to mop up the Eritreans, it somehow maintained a position of relative neutrality. It is almost as if someone said the United States adopted a neutral position between the

²⁰ *ACR*, 1980-81, p. A119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. A123.

²² *Granma*, 7 February 1977.

²³ Raúl Valdés Vivó, *Eritrea: the Unknown Revolution* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977), p. 83; Valdés, "Cuba in the Horn," p. 84.

²⁴ Radio Havana, 27 April 1978.

²⁵ Tekie Fessehatzion, "Comment," *Mesa-Lago, Cuba in Africa*, p. 100.

government and guerrillas in El Salvador during the early and mid-1980s, on the grounds that the U.S. did not send thousands of combat troops but "only a few advisers and some aid."

There are reports that after the victory in the Ogaden in early 1978, Cuban troops were used, at least briefly, in Eritrea. According to EPLF sources, several thousand Cuban troops were in the Asmara area by mid-March 1978; by the end of the year, while Cuban leaders were assuring the world that Cuba had no military role in Eritrea—which, it might be recalled, it had said about Somalia, too, prior to the rout of the Somali forces—an informed Eritrean reported that "Cuban troops were engaged in the battles for the control of Massawa, Ghinda, Dongollo and the areas around Asmara."²⁶ The Cubans admitted the presence of several thousand Cubans in Asmara, but said they were necessary to maintain stability in the capital. A year later, an EPLF spokesman in Rome reported that all Cuban troops had been withdrawn from Eritrea and returned to the Ogaden to deal with a resurgence of fighting there, and there is little reliable information to the contrary.²⁷

Whatever the role of Cuban troops in Eritrea, there is abundant evidence that Castro provided other kinds of critical support for the Ethiopian effort. For one thing, the Cubans left well over 10,000 troops in the Ogaden even when they moved several thousand to Eritrea; those troops, and the several thousand when they moved back, secured the Ogaden battle grounds so that Cuban-trained Ethiopian troops could fight Eritreans in the north. As an EPLF spokesman said in June 1978, Cuba was "firmly committed to supporting a major Ethiopian offensive against guerrillas in Eritrea."²⁸ One Eritrean analyst wrote in 1979, "The evidence of Cuban involvement in training and advising of Ethiopian militia deployed in Eritrea is overwhelming."²⁹

Cuban involvement has continued as the Ethiopian government has pursued its war against the Eritreans. In 1982 an Ethiopian leftist party that opposes the Mengistu government reported, "Thousands of soldiers, supported by jet fighters and Russian and Cuban military experts, are spreading over Eritrea."

²⁶ Fessehatzion, "Comment," pp. 99-100; Papp, "The Soviet Union and Cuba in Ethiopia," p. 114.

²⁷ Cervenka and Legum, "Cuba in Africa in 1978," p. A62; "Ethiopia," *ACR, 1978-1979*, p. B232.

²⁸ Cervenka and Legum, "Cuba in Africa in 1978," A62.

²⁹ Valdés, "Cuba in the Horn," pp. 100, 102.

And in 1983, a Cuba specialist reporting on the Eritrean Revolution noted the Ethiopian government's "growing dependence on Eastern-bloc and Cuban military supplies, advisers, and logistical support."³⁰ The fighting continues in the mid-1980s despite severe famine in Eritrea and Addis Ababa's obstruction of relief aid intended for the area. In August 1985 the guerrillas claimed to control 80 percent of the country and Western analysts tended to concur with their claim.³¹

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ERITREAN WAR

The Eritrean war drew the same official response from the OAU as the Ogaden war: we can't support a change in colonial borders, etc. But the Eritrean guerrillas maintained strong support abroad, ranging from countries in the Arab League to the Italian Communist Party. Independent Marxists in Africa—as distinct from those who automatically follow the Soviet line—also were critical of the Soviet-Cuban action. A long-time professor at Dar es Salaam University in Tanzania, the late Guyanese scholar and pro-Cuban political activist Walter Rodney, commented on the self-serving Ethiopian government and concluded:

We do seem to face a real threat of Cuban aid, in one way or other, being behind the (Ethiopian) regime while it pursues the old Haile Selassie policy of suppression of the Eritrean people. And therefore, it requires a political commitment that will have to take the form of bringing it to the notice of the Cuban people that there are groups or individuals or analyses which start from a standpoint of sympathy with the Cuban revolution, and the African revolution, and which do not believe that the presence of the Cubans in the Horn is a contribution to either of those two revolutions.³²

³⁰ "The Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Party Condemns the Mengistu Party in Eritrea," *The Eritrean Review*, May 1982, p. 16; and editorial "Twenty two years of War," *Ibid.*, p. 5. James Petras, "The Eritrean Revolution & Contemporary World Politics," *Eritrea Information*, September 1983, p. 9.

³¹ *New York Times*, 4 August 1985.

³² *ACR, 1978-79*, p. A58.

A PATTERN OF BETRAYALS: THE AMERICAS AND AFRICA

Cuban policies in the Horn during the late 1970s drew attention to the many faces of Fidel Castro and to the importance that role duplicity and betrayal have played in his career, whether dealing with the credulous foreign press (notably Herbert Mathews of *The New York Times* among many others), with his countrymen (from Huber Matos to ordinary citizens), with governments and even with revolutionaries abroad.

Castro's betrayal of the Somalis and Eritreans—foreshadowed in important respects by his withdrawal of support from Latin American guerrillas in the late 1960s, a decade and an ocean apart—demonstrate Castro's willingness to betray allies in pursuit of personal, national and/or Soviet interests. According to some unconfirmed reports, Cuba provided backup for the overthrow of the South Yemen government in 1986.

Between 1965 and 1968, and particularly in 1967, Castro played a dominant role in splitting apart many of the already unstable Marxist-Leninist organizations of Latin America, and actively promoted guerrilla warfare through tiny splinter groups of radical "Castroite" revolutionaries. These bands had no significant support from the people or even from other Marxist-Leninists in their countries. The model was the Cuban Revolution, in a caricature by Regis Debray, prepared under Castro's guidance.³⁴ Some critical elements in the Cuban success, including the formation of a broad front of political and military support for the guerrillas, were not only ignored but belittled.

This revolutionary model probably could not have succeeded anywhere; but Cuba promoted it everywhere. A few well-informed "Castroites"—there weren't many—knew Castro and Debray were pushing a misleading oversimplification of the Cuban experience. Foremost among them was the Venezuelan Douglas Bravo, who in 1968 said Debray's *foto* model was a "dogmatic little recipe" which was "a distortion of what occurred in Cuba, a distortion which unquestionably resulted in defeats of great magnitude in Latin America, culminating in the destruction of

the guerrilla nucleus in Bolivia and particularly in the death of Commandante Ernesto Guevara."³⁵

Castro knew full well the *foto* he was pushing was a dogmatic little recipe. By late 1968, when he was making his first dramatic turn toward improving relations with the Soviet Union—his endorsement of the Soviet-bloc invasion of Czechoslovakia—unofficial spokesmen for the Cuban government and Debray himself admitted the *foto* argument was merely a superficial tract.³⁶ This admission coincided with a sharp cut in Cuban support for Latin American guerrillas, including groups Castro had virtually created and then personally nurtured throughout the hemisphere. Some of Castro's strongest supporters became his severest critics, charging that the Cuban leader had sold out to the Soviet Union and was sacrificing Latin American guerrillas as a consequence. Among the loudest critics were Europeans Rene Dumont and K.S. Karol, and the Venezuelan Bravo.

Why did Castro promote a fraudulent Cuban guerrilla model? Why did he help create, train, and supply the little *foto* bands, which went against lessons of Cuban and other revolutionary history, and then suddenly abandon them? One may argue, as I have on occasion in the past, that Castro thought the line might be successful but learned otherwise from experiences around the continent, particularly in Bolivia. But it is perhaps equally plausible that Castro knew the revolutionary model would not bring many (if any) victories, but promoted it anyway largely because he thought it would take pressure off Cuba by directing U.S. attention to other "trouble spots" in the hemisphere. That is, he promoted the "two, three, many Vietnams" Guevara had called for in his famous 1966 "Message to the Tricontinental." In doing so he was quite prepared to sacrifice many Latin American guerrillas, and others besides, by pushing a suicidal revolutionary line just because this would get the United States overextended in the world and distract U.S. attention from himself.³⁷ By 1968, and more so in 1970 and thereafter, Castro saw he could not survive his own domestic and international blunders without massive assistance from the Soviet Union, assistance which would come only if he cultivated a much closer relationship with Moscow and followed Soviet-line policies, particularly in the Third World.

³⁴ According to K.S. Karol, Debray wrote his book "after long private discussions with Fidel Castro, who... himself revised and corrected the proofs." Karol, *Guerrillas in Power* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), p. 374.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

In Latin America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the Soviet line meant getting out of the business of promoting armed revolution through fragmented guerrilla bands. In Africa in the mid 1970s, on the contrary, it meant promoting armed struggle, but in accordance with the joint Cuban-Soviet strategy examined above. In the Horn, early Cuban support for the Somalis and Eritreans was paralleled by support for those parties from the Soviet Union. Assistance to the Eritrean guerrillas in particular was in line with the image Castro has long tried to cultivate in the Third World, or among Third World sympathizers in industrialized societies. And that image was a defender of the downtrodden, of those who are oppressed by "U.S. imperialism" and its "lackeys," which in the Ethiopian case meant supporting the Eritreans against America's friend, Emperor Haile Selassie. In fact, Cuban support for the Eritreans had come before the Cuban-Soviet strategy of cooperation in the Third World had been developed.

But Cuba turned on both Somalia and then Eritrea when the Soviet Union did so. After the Ogaden war had been won in March 1978, Castro remarked that in December 1977, when the Somalis were advancing in the Ogaden and the Eritreans had taken much of northern Ethiopia, a situation arose "where only resolute and determined internationalist support for the heroic struggle of the Ethiopian people would save the independence, territorial integrity, and Revolution in their country."³⁸ This statement introduced the rationalization for Castro's betrayal of both the Somalis and the Eritreans.

"The Ethiopian people" had come to mean the Mengistu government and the Mengistu government in direct armed combat with the millions of ethnic Somalis in and around the Ogaden, whose reunification under Somali leadership Castro had supported in 1972, and the Eritreans, whose legitimate liberation struggle to break free from colonialist rule by Addis Ababa Cuba had supported for almost a decade.

Castro could fall back on the old territorial integrity line. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Castro had come down on the side of the true national liberation movements of the Somali and Eritrean peoples, with only a nod in the former case toward OAU in the phrase "by peaceful means," a disingenuous proviso at best, since Castro must have known Siad Barre's goal could not possibly have been achieved in that way precisely because of the insistence on the principle of territorial integrity. Supporting Siad Barre's call for unity of the Somali people was a bold

—and in hindsight, ill-informed and foolish—move on Cuba's part, but it was taken. By the mid 1970s Castro was having second thoughts and in 1977-78 he openly reversed his position. The change does not seem to reflect Castro's sudden indifference to either the Somalis or Eritreans, particularly the latter, but his subservience to the interests of the Soviet Union, which often serves his own interests.

Castro tried to argue his betrayal away in the case of Somalia by saying that Siad Barre had launched an armed attack against Ethiopia, a socialist ally. But his case was, in the words of Reginald Bunthorne, "hollow, hollow, hollow." One embittered Somali put it this way:

Armed struggle is a legitimate extension of the political struggle for self-determination" As long as there is a revolutionary with a gun, no cause will ever be lost," Castro told senior army officers in 1976 . . . The history of Cuba's international involvement since Castro's rise to power demonstrates his extreme reliance on the preeminent role of the military in foreign policy . . . Cuba then puts itself in the position of judge of whether or not Somalis have a right to liberate themselves by all means possible including armed struggle.³⁹

But it was harder still to make a case for reversing policy in the Eritrean war, and, in the end, Cuba simply mouthed the line of the Soviet Union and Ethiopia's new dictator, Mengistu. For Castro to speak of Ethiopia's "territorial integrity" being challenged by the Eritrean movement, when only a decade earlier Cuba had trained Eritreans in their "anti-colonial" struggle with Addis Ababa, is to cave in to utter cynicism and subservience. Either Castro must admit that his original protestations of support for anti-colonialism were disingenuous, and that Cuba was only interested in the anti-American aspects of the Eritrean war, or he must maintain his support (intellectually and spiritually) for the Eritrean struggle, but go along with effort to crush it because of broader strategic interests of Cuba and the Soviet Union. As in the case of the Latin American guerrillas a decade earlier, former friends were sacrificed on the altar of broader national and geostrategic objectives. In the Eritrean case, Cuba seems to have tried to split the difference when no split was possible. As one Eritrean analyst put it:

³⁸ Said Yusuf Abdi, "Comment," in Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in Africa*, p. 97.

³⁹ *Granma*, 16 March 1978.

In the final analysis, it matters very little whether Cuban officials have qualms about the Dergue's Eritrean policy; what is more important is that Cuban advisers trained Ethiopian peasant militia, manned and maintained sophisticated Soviet military hardware in the Dergue's arsenal, and have made possible, at least temporarily, the reconquest of Eritrea's urban areas.⁴⁰

Castro's abandonment of the Latin American guerrillas in the late 1960s, of the Somalis and Eritreans less than a decade later, and perhaps of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1986, all occurred in cooperation with the Soviet Union. The African betrayals, in particular, reflected Castro's conviction that what is good for the Soviet Union is, by and large, good for Cuba as well, at least in international terms. It would be a serious mistake—indeed, a denial of historical evidence—to maintain that Castro cultivated an interest in Africa simply or even largely to repay the Soviet Union for its aid or simply to curry favor with Moscow, as some of Castro's severest critics maintain. But it is just as blind and disingenuous to deny or rationalize away his duplicity in East Africa, his betrayal of the Somalis and Eritreans, when the Soviet Union decided an Ethiopia, including Eritrea, was a more valuable ally than Somalia.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union has been a clear winner in its cooperation with Cuba in the Horn. Moscow has not achieved all of its objectives, to be sure. Eritrea remains beyond Soviet/Ethiopian control, just as the people of Afghanistan have held off the thrust of Soviet power in their country. And thus Soviet geostrategic objectives are as yet unrealized. But given the complexity of Soviet objectives, Moscow has put its best foot forward. It took advantage of the United States when that country was suffering from the Vietnam war loss and Watergate. Its new ally in the Horn, Ethiopia, withstood the Somali offensive in 1977-78 only with the aid of thousands of well-trained foreign troops. The Soviet Union would never have sent its own troops to the Ogaden, nor those of any other ally besides Cuba. Cuba, with its well-trained forces, and deeply indebted to the Soviet Union, provided the best possible answer.

Castro personally gained substantially from this venture with Moscow. The cooperative effort gave new scope to Castro's global mission against

⁴⁰ Fessehatzion, "Comment," pp. 100, 102.

the United States: it took his war with the United States to a new continent and laid the groundwork for unprecedented Soviet-Cuban cooperation in the Western Hemisphere as well. Castro could not have made such a global impact without Soviet support. In providing such a service for Moscow, he made the Soviet Union more indebted to him and improved his chances of receiving continued massive economic and military aid from the Soviet bloc. In strictly military terms, his military forces got extensive battlefield experience unequalled by any other Latin American military. What is more, when Havana sent military or civilian advisers and others abroad, Cuba received substantial revenue for their transportation and maintenance; it has been estimated that Cuban services sold abroad brought in as much as \$200 million in 1979 alone.

Cuba did suffer some setbacks. Many Africans considered Castro's role in advancing Soviet interests a demeaning subservience to Moscow and criticism of him was common in the Non-Aligned Movement. Cuba paid for this battlefield experience with up to 9,000 casualties, losses which seem to have created some dissatisfaction with Castro's international policies among Cubans at home. Also, the diversion of resources—including teachers and doctors—abroad kept them from improving the lives of their countrymen. The strain of the war on the economy led to significant shifts within the Cuban government in 1978-79 and later. Finally, reliance on the Soviet Union deepened while chances for a rapprochement with the United States were postponed.

The Soviet-Cuban moves in Angola and then Ethiopia began in the mid-1970s, while the United States was nursing its Vietnam and Watergate wounds in inward-looking isolationism. The prestige of the United States suffered and Soviet objectives were advanced more easily than they might have been if the Americans had played a more active role in countering communist policies. When Soviet-Cuban cooperation turned to the Caribbean Basin in the late 1970s, the United States began to shake some of its Vietnam complex. Among the fields open for action in response to Cuba were several in Africa.

In 1985-86 Cuba had some 35,000 men in Angola (30,000 combat troops and 5,000 advisers) where Cubans reportedly have been involved in the war against the UNITA forces, which the United States belatedly has begun to support.

There are about 700 Cubans in the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (500 combat troops and 200 advisers), Yemen reportedly being used as a staging area for Cuban troops going to Ethiopia. According to the U.S. State Department, Cubans provided logistics support and main-

tenance of equipment for the rebel forces which launched an uprising in January 1986 against the government of Ali Nasir Muhammad, which both the Soviet Union and Castro had supported for more than 15 years. Once again, Castro turned on a long-time friend while following the Soviet lead in international affairs.

During 1983-84 Cuban troop strength in Ethiopia was reduced from about 13,000 to approximately 5,000 (3,000 combat troops and 2,000 advisers), where it stood at the beginning of 1986. The reduction evidently occurred because of the limited number of military engagements with Somalia and because Ethiopia could not easily afford to maintain them. On 26 July 1985, Addis Ababa domestic service broadcast a message from Mengistu to Castro noting that the "solidarity, contribution and support from Cubans has enabled the laying of a strong foundation toward the efforts to build a new society."

The shape of the new society Cuba is helping Mengistu to build became increasingly evident during 1985 and 1986. One of its most objectionable features is a resettlement program launched in 1984. The government plans to move as many as two million people from the plateaus in the north to the southwest. Although the program is defended in economic terms, it is in fact primarily another campaign in Addis Ababa's protracted war against the rebel forces. The objective is to depopulate the provinces in order to deprive the rebels of their human base of support. This resettlement program, according to the French relief agency *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, is deceptive and brutal and probably had taken 100,000 lives by the end of 1985; MSF estimated that 300,000 might die if the program goes ahead as planned. According to a long, confidential MSF report finished in December 1985, "In Ethiopia now the resettlement is hereforth more fatal to the population than the drought."⁴¹ Ironically, some of the program is supported by international famine relief aid.

Thus the Ethiopian tragedy persists. The Cuban role in the resettlement program has yet to be determined. Those who recall Mengistu's words above, and Cuba's long quiet role in the conflict with Somalia, are not sanguine about Castro's involvement there today.

⁴¹ *Medecins Sans Frontieres, Mass Deportations in Ethiopia* (Paris: December 1985), a confidential report by Dr. Claude Malhurst, 71 pages.

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